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Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 August 2018]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Human rights situation in the Kingdom of Morocco's Rif Region

400 members and supporters of the Hirak al-Rif movement were arrested in the past one and a half years. On 26 June 2018, Nasser Zefzafi, the leader of the Hirak movement, as well as three other leading Hirak figures were sentenced to 20 years in prison. 49 accused received longtime prison sentences or fines, among them were Mohamed Haki, Zakaria Zakaria Adechchour and Mahmoud Bouhenoud were sentenced to 15 years in prison. Seven other people were sentenced to ten years in prison for alleged "endangering of state security".

In October 2016 the biggest protest movement in the Kingdom of Morocco since Arab Spring erupted after a fish merchant was crushed to death in a garbage truck as he tried to retrieve the fish confiscated by policemen for being caught out of season. The tragic event has happened in the city of al-Hoceima in Northern Morocco. In the days after the death of the merchant, furious protesters in the often neglected nearby mountainous Rif region founded the Hirak al-Rif movement.

The Rif has seen a history of repression and neglect. The region, which is mostly inhabited by non-arabic indigenous Amazigh people, has suffered for decades from strong unemployment rates particularly among young people. The expansion of illegal narcotic production and its criminalization has led to more emigration to Europe. The brutal crushing of a popular uprising in the Rif in the year 1958 has created a feeling of injustice and has led to a distrust of the state among the inhabitants of the mountain range. This difficult relationship with the authorities has caused more neglect and the denial of development by Moroccan authorities.

From the beginning of the protests, Hirak has drafted a list of demands, including the demilitarization of the region, the right to a fair trial, more infrastructure development, investment and the construction of a hospital and a university. The media reporting about the Hirak protests were massively cracked down by the Moroccan authorities. Journalists were detained, their websites were arbitrarily shut down and foreign journalists were systematically hindered from entering the Rif region.

The journalist Hamid el Mahdaoui was sentenced to four years and three months in prison because of his reporting on the Rif movement. Lawyers of the detained accused the Morrocan authorities of torture of their clients. Due to the repression more and more people are fleeing the Kingdom of Morocco to Spain.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the Moroccan Government:

- To stop the criminal investigations against members of the Rif region,
- Release the members of the Hirak movement from prison,
- To ensure freedom of assembly, opinion and press in the Rif region,
- To initiative discussions with the Hirak leadership on a peaceful solution of the conflict and on the implementation of their demands.